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## Introduction

Mihaela Mihai

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# Introduction

It is generally agreed that references to women's rights have often been instrumentalised for furthering political agendas, nationally and internationally. Sadly, not all concerns with women's rights are meant to further democratic causes. More often than not, appeals to women's interests, freedoms, and bodies serve as justifications for ethically and democratically problematic goals. The idea for this special number of *e-cadernos ces* came from a workshop with the same title organised under the aegis of the "Gender Workshop Series" of the Centre for Social Studies at the University of Coimbra in 2012. Júlia Garraio, Teresa Toldy and I invited a number of scholars to reflect on the ways in which public discourses about what are generally labelled "problematic cultural practices" – the public use of various forms of the Muslim veil, female genital cutting, or the institutionalisation of religious family law within Western democracies – often did not take into account women's voices and frequently used them to put a stop to migration, justify foreign intervention in a sovereign state or politically exclude certain groups from participation in decision-making. What is more, many times such discourses confront many women with a tragic – and unnecessary – choice between their rights as individuals and their cultural allegiance. The hope of the organisers was that, through constructive dialogues, the participants would overcome the two radically opposite positions that currently dominate public debates: a universal and aggressive form of liberalism, at one extreme, and a cultural relativism that requires us to suspend our moral judgement, at the other extreme. On the one hand, some militant liberals pose as concerned feminists and fight to "liberate" the "poor women" from "their culture," without any sensitivity for the value of the cultural practices for the women concerned. On the other hand, relativists often and too easily relinquish the responsibility to formulate an informed, complex critique of certain practices and institutions that prevent women from exercising their rights and participating in the life of the political community.

The presenters at the workshop unpacked the complex issues associated with such debates and concluded that the polarization of the public sphere around women's rights

had a negative impact on the quality of the public deliberation and, more importantly, on the lives of those concerned. First, the internal complexity and the multiplicity of functions that cultural practices fulfil for women were dismissed as irrelevant. The idea that religion could have any positive role in the lives of these women is dispelled as irrational or implausible. The autonomous, Western woman is, more often than not, represented as a model that women from “backward” societies should aspire to. This amounts to a reductionist, culturally insensitive, paternalistic move. Secondly, the non-cultural factors (economic, geopolitical, environmental) that affect the lives of women may become invisible. The story commonly told is about “their” being victimised by “their” culture and religion. The structure of the global economy, international or domestic conflicts and climate change are seldom taken into consideration when analysing the fate of “disadvantaged women.” Third, under the pretext of defending women rights, imperialist, xenophobic and racist agendas oftentimes get promoted. As mentioned above, women’s rights – not necessarily women’s voices – make it justifiable for the governments of Western states to make decisions that affect them and their communities a great deal. Fourth, the ways in which women exercise agency within their cultures frequently become invisible. It becomes inconceivable, for a certain brand of Western feminism, that women might exercise any sort of meaningful decision-making outside the confines of the generous West. And fifth, high levels of violence against “emancipated” women in the “developed world” are, again and again, ignored. Criticising the oppression of women elsewhere makes some “good liberals” make self-righteous statements about how far they have made it in the struggle for emancipation, forgetting the structural violence that women in the West still face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Encouraged by the interest sparked by the workshop, we launched a call for papers that addressed these thorny issues from a variety of perspectives and disciplines. We enlarged the scope of the call to include broader political manoeuvres to mobilise women’s rights for political goals. The result is a set of thought-provoking, insightful articles that tackle these themes in ways that add important layers of complexity to the debate. The articles look at a variety of contexts (domestic, migratory, international and domestic war) and focus on the use of women’s rights for political purposes by the media, domestic governments and international organizations. The instrumentalising discourses that emerged from the analysis are not, however, limited to journalists and decision-makers. They permeate the public culture of contemporary democracies in ways that can only be detrimental to women’s equal participation as full citizens.

In what follows, I will briefly introduce the contributions to this number. The importance of women’s rights for building antagonistic cultural identities, the manipulation of women’s concerns for undemocratic agendas, and their representation as lacking political and

cultural agency emerge again and again in all articles and give coherence to this special number. Due to the international political context, most articles deal with the ways in which Muslim women's bodies and rights have been instrumentalised for political purposes. The editors of this number want to clarify that, although such phenomena are currently more prominent in public and academic debates, the manipulation of women's concerns is not exclusive to this group.

**Arik** offers us a historical reconstruction of the conflict between two rival understandings of women's freedom in Turkey: the Islamist and the republican. She challenges the dichotomic thinking that links the veil with pre-modernity and Western dress with freedom and unmasks the instrumentalization of women's bodies and dress for furthering these opposite political agendas. Arik demystifies the veil through a reconstruction of the ways in which they were used historically in Muslim societies. She challenges embedded ideas about its oppressive character but also offers an analysis of its sexualised nature and its relationship with issues of honour, issues that are not always in tune with women's interests and rights. Controversially for some, Arik critically shows how the republican discourse can be as oppressive to women as the religiously inspired one. She writes: "Although they might seem contradictory, constructions of the Republican woman and of the headscarved woman are embedded in the same heterosexual matrix that ascribes women with traditional roles of femininity, sexual modesty, and honour." (p. 27). Western dress co-exists with a common sense that relegates women to the private sphere. Oftentimes, women use the veil as a means to manifest their religious identity and this presupposes agency and deliberation. Through this nuanced article, Arik encourages us to think discriminately and avoid the pitfalls of dichotomic thinking about women's conditions.

**Toldy** also looks into the way in which discourses about Muslims in general, and Muslim women in particular, are played out in public debates within a democratic society, Portugal. The author uses discourse analysis to critically engage with the media coverage of a controversial statement by the Cardinal of Lisbon, regarding the "dangers" associated with marriages between Portuguese women and the Muslims who have historically been living in Portugal. The rigorously researched and insightful article reveals how the statement itself, as well as the way in which the Portuguese media reported it, display a Manichean vision of "good Christian" versus "bad Muslims," of "us" versus "them." The Muslim community is abusively portrayed as hermetic and disingenuous in its dealings with the Catholic majority. Most importantly, the Cardinal of Lisbon, as well as the newspapers that reported his statements, resort to a predictable manoeuvre: they appeal to women's freedoms in order to caricaturise and vilify the different other, the Muslim. In order to capture the audience's attention, the cardinal and the journalists alike reinforce

the idea that the brutalisation of women is inherent to the Muslim culture. A stark warning is launched about the fact that marital alliances between “their men” and “our women” are fraught with problems. This is why any Christian woman considering marriage with a Muslim man should be aware that trouble lies ahead and that, once she enters “their” culture, nobody can save her. Sadly enough, this type of vilification permeates the wider perception of Muslims in Portugal and is reproduced unreflectively by the media.

The kind of dichotomic and monolithic thinking is not exclusive to the Portuguese case. **Giorgi** shifts our attention to the migratory context. In her article on the representation of migrant women’s lives to Italy, she analyses 634 articles published in Italian newspapers between June 2005 and July 2012 in order to highlight the way in which issues of fertility and sexuality dominate the public discourse on the immigrant woman. The public discourse does seem to be more differentiated than in Portugal, with the left-right distinction crucial for the position journalists adopt on the topic. On the right, migrant women reproductive behaviours are seen as ignorant, irresponsible and strictly determined by their country of origin. Concerns over different understandings of “proper” sexual behaviour by migrant women lead journalists to affirm the superiority of Western women’s freedoms over the plight of women whose cultures oppress them. They are also feared as vehicles of a de-italianization of Italy. Their attitudes – unequivocally determined by their culture or religion – constitute a sufficient reason to put a stop to multiculturalism and immigration. On the left, analysts fall prey to the chimera of the Western woman’s emancipation and make self-determination the test for migrant’s women’s integration in the Italian society. While deploring the kind of painful adaptations and hardships that migrant women face in the host country, Italy, left intellectuals tend to reinforce the problematic idea that the only life worth living is the autonomous life. Thus, in various ways, discourses on both the left and the right contribute to the alterisation of the migrant women and to seeing them merely as victims, never as agents. Their cultural and/or economic subordination is read as their main characteristic.

**Agboola’s** contribution remains within the confines of a migratory context and takes issue with the Canadian government’s decision to ban the wearing of the niqab from citizenship ceremonies. Two goals guide the author: first, proposing a normative account of why the niqab is not in tension with Canadian values and second, a criticism of the undemocratic process through which the decision to ban the head-dress was reached. Through a nuanced analysis, Agboola shows that wearing a niqab is not synonymous with being oppressed by one’s culture. Like Arik, the author outlines the multiple functions that the niqab can play in the life of a woman, emphasising its role in securing her cultural and religious identity. Failure to recognise the Muslim woman’s need for social respect and recognition can lead to great distress for those affected. Using Bouchard and

Taylor's account of reasonable accommodation, Agboola offers us normative reasons why the niqab should not be banned from citizenship ceremonies: it is not in tension with equality clauses and allowing it does not impose undue hardship on the government. He speculates that the exclusion of niqab wearers from citizenship ceremonies might not have passed had the decision been made in an inclusive manner. Based on an exclusionary, undemocratic process of decision-making, a process in which the voices of Muslim women were never heard, the Canadian government established that the wearing of the niqab contravened Canada's endorsement of gender equality. And this is, argues the author, where trouble begins: in the silencing of those whose rights are at stake.

**Garraio's** article takes us to conflict zones and explores the strategy of using crimes committed against women as justificatory tools for the warring parties. The author tackles the ways in which wartime rape has been depicted by two international media outlets – BBC and CNN – during the conflict in Libya. Through careful and detailed analysis, she shows how these two agencies focused on reporting those cases of war rape that helped justify the allies' intervention in Libya. However, this is not the whole story. In addition to choosing to emphasise certain types of victims and perpetrators, BBC and CNN sent another, subtler, message about the "culture" of a Muslim society. Garraio argues that the outlets put a great emphasis on women's failure to report having been raped, a fact they too easily explained by blaming "their culture": in the eyes of Western journalists, women did not report rapes for fear of cultural opprobrium and social stigma. Non-Western women belong to "backward" cultures where rape is shameful for the victim and the victim is blamed for her own suffering. The implication is that, unlike the conservative, traditionalist Libyan society, the West has long overcome such regressive ideas. This is another manner, argues the author, of stereotyping the different others and relegating them to an inferior or backward status. And, as in the articles discussed above, it is women's bodies, rights and interests that are invoked, while their voices are sometimes framed to suit certain political interests.

In contradistinction to the articles discussed above **Cunha** and **Nicholls** share a concern with solutions. While mainly critical, these two pieces also seek to propose tentative solutions to our conundrum. Cunha highlights the colonisation of Timorese national foundational myths by heroic men, to the exclusion of heroic women. To the extent that women are included in the national foundational narrative, they are included as subordinate, essentially private persons. Through a series of four theses, Cunha proposes an alternative narrative of the national struggle for independence, based in the experience of a politically engaged woman, Bi-Murak. Such a woman-centred narrative is more conducive to a democratic future, where internal differences can be engaged productively. Her exercise in reconstruction is meant to rescue women from their secondary role as

political actors and recuperate them for the post-conflict Timorese imagined community, and not only.

Nicholls's paper tries to unpack the nature of abusive relationships by using insights from Fanon's analysis of the colonial state. Her grim, yet hopeful contribution makes for a great closing contribution to this number. The author builds a provocative parallel between the structural oppression of colonised people and the structural oppression of women. She writes: "Fanon's analysis seems to me to provide the most fruitful theoretical bridge between the violence of abstraction that allows legislation guaranteeing women's bodily integrity to become a political football and the structural violence that marks the everyday lives of women (and their male allies) who survive and resist the gendered violences of sexual assault and intimate partner abuse." (p. 175). Fanon is helpful in making us see both the overt and the hidden faces of oppression. The solution, Nichols argues, lies with grassroots mobilisation and the building of alliances. Yet, without a clearer understanding of how oppression works and without solidarity between social actors, no change in the plight of abused women, present and future, is possible.

The *@cetera* features a set of insightful testimonies by Osman Tekin and Lisa Gabriel, two young people involved with a Youth Centre in Berlin, a centre where cultural differences are negotiated daily in an atmosphere of respect and mutual support, against the background of a public culture fraught with stereotypical images of immigrant men and women. The contributions by Tekin and Gabriel highlight the practical nefarious effects of Manichean thinking. Speaking from experience, the two interviewees elaborate on how stereotypes of both Muslims and Westerners negatively influence the lives of the children and teenagers they have been working with. These negative effects can be felt in terms of their identity, their sense of the social world and the possibility of intercultural dialogue. The interventions by these two activists represent an important and necessary supplement to the theoretical reflection in the academic articles. It serves as a reality check, it shows the salience of the topic today, and helps us calibrate our prospects for a more democratic and inclusive future.

It is the editors' hope that this thematic number constitutes a valuable contribution to meaningful debates about women's rights and identities, debates that must continue in more productive directions from now on. Changing the terms of the debate from a dichotomic, stereotypical understanding of "us" v. "them" is, however, a prerequisite if we are to avoid reductionist visions of democratic politics.

Mihaela Mihai